Ethnographic research in audiovisual translation

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, research in audiovisual translation (AVT) has been thriving. Yet, it has often been limited to the technical and linguistic constraints at play in the different audiovisual translation modes, the production process, and the quality of the translated work (Gambier 2006). So far, the people who actually make use of the translated content seem to have been largely overlooked by AVT scholars. As Gambier (2009: 52) notes, ‘[v]ery few studies have dealt with the issue of reception in AVT, and even fewer have looked at empirically [sic], even though we continually make references to readers, viewers, customers, users, etc’.

Undoubtedly, recent eye-tracking-based audience studies (e.g. Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow 2011) have yielded important insights into the cognitive efforts required from viewers to process audiovisual material, thus opening up new avenues for quantitative research on reception studies. Nevertheless, the issue of reception in AVT is not confined to knowing about or catering for the cognitive capacity of end-users. This view would be too restrictive, considering that there are a wide range of sociological and audiovisual variables (e.g. age, gender, education, class, reading habits, audiovisual genre, broadcasting time and channel) that affect viewers’ attitudes and their opinions on what they watch (Gambier 2001).

This is particularly true in the twenty-first-century media environment, where the digitalization of media content and the convergence of media platforms overwhelm audiences with abundant and diverse media outlets; allow them to choose among various devices to access audiovisual material whenever and wherever they want; divide large audiences into smaller niche groups by tailoring target content to their specific needs; and allow (and often require) interactions between audiences and those who produce media content (Jenkins 2006). Moreover, the proliferation of communication technologies has made it possible for increasing audiences to promote their own media experiences by appropriating, translating (subtitling, in particular) and circulating a variety of audiovisual products on a collaborative and voluntary basis. This phenomenon, often known as ‘community translation’ (Fernández Costales 2012) or ‘participatory audiovisual translation’ (Pérez-González 2014), has in turn problematized traditional conceptualizations of viewers as passive information consumers, as...
well as our view of the very process of AVT, defined as ‘the loss with very little intervention by the translator’ (Gambier 2013: 54). Recent research on communities of amateur mediators suggests that the nature of these communities with ‘permeable and porous’ boundaries (Baker 2013: 25) makes them a new powerful locus of collective identity formation, which has the potential to challenge the ‘narratives circulated by the media elites and the socio-political structures they represent’ (Pérez-González 2010: 271).

Against this backdrop of fast changes in the current media landscape, such as the proliferation of media sources, the fragmentation of audiences, and the new forms of engagement of audiences with the information that comes their way, it is more important than ever before to undertake research on audiovisual translation from the point of view of end-users in their real-life settings, in order to gain a better understanding of the role of AVT in their daily lives. This requires scholars to move beyond traditional (predominantly quantitative) approaches to audience studies, and embrace new methodological developments that enable explorations into how specific audience groups, such as those engaged in collaborative and community-based translation, respond to, and appropriate, audiovisual texts; and shed light on the range of contexts, circumstances, and purposes driving those processes of engagement, collaboration and appropriation. This chapter argues that ethnography can serve as a useful research method in the context of AVT because it represents ‘an epistemological shift’ that ‘forc[es] its practitioners to empathise with participants and adopt their standpoint’ (Ladner 2014: 73), so as to ‘secure an up-close, first-hand, intimate understanding of the social world, issues, and/or processes of interest, particularly as they are experienced and understood by the individuals studied’ (Snow 1999: 98).

The fact that we are making use of an ever-growing and more mobile set of digital technologies to engage in the experience and co-creation of audiovisual texts inevitably presents several challenges for an ethnographic approach to AVT. For instance, how can we define the locus of users’ activities, when they are geographically dispersed and interact through various types of online platforms (e.g. blogs, wikis and social networking sites)? If we are to investigate such multi-sited online communities, how should we present ourselves and build relationships with participants? How should we monitor and gauge the authenticity and truthfulness of the information provided by participants, given that it would be easy for them to provide researchers with false or inaccurate information, or even fabricate an online identity? Which fieldwork tools should we choose to capture, archive and analyze various forms of digital data (e.g. text images, audio and video) gathered from online fieldsites? Without the thorough technical, social and cultural knowledge required to fully participate in technology-mediated social settings, we are likely to be reduced to ‘covert participant observers’ who ‘shape the digital fieldsite in sometimes unfamiliar ways’ (Murthy 2008: 849).

This chapter sets out to address these important issues and presents ‘netnography’ or ‘Internet ethnography’ (Kozinets 2010)—a form of ethnographic research ‘adapted to the unique contingencies of various types of computer-mediated social interaction’ (ibid.: 20)—as a productive method to study how media consumers, particularly amateur mediators such as fansubbers and activist subtitlers, interact with audiovisual products and form communities based on their collaborative media consumption experiences. I then draw on my own experience as a netnographer investigating a multi-sited online community of Chinese fansubbers, and explain how netnographic fieldwork is conducted—with special attention to issues encountered during the fieldwork and the strategies developed to tackle them. Ultimately, this chapter shows how AVT researchers can manage effectively the sort of methodological challenges that are likely to arise when studying these sites of AVT activity.
Netnography

Netnography derives its name from the aggregation of ‘net’ (as in ‘the Internet’) and ‘ethnography’. As the meanings of its constitutive morphemes—‘ethno’ (people) and ‘graphy’ (describing)—denote, ethnography involves a detailed or ‘thick’ description (Geertz 1973) of the culture of a group of people with unique, though often shared, patterns of behaviour, beliefs and values. This entails the need for prolonged periods of participant observation and/or researchers’ immersion into the daily lives of the study subjects. By ‘watching what happens, listening to what is said, [and] asking questions’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1), researchers gather representative data to inform their interpretations of the cultural issues under scrutiny. This relatively open approach allows the researcher to identify unforeseen events that emerge while conducting fieldwork as important and worth pursuing; it also helps researchers to make sense of these events based on their interaction with cultural members; information pertaining to the immediate environment where the activities under investigation take place; and the wider social context in which community members and their activities are embedded (Bryman 1998). From this perspective, the researcher’s self-reflexivity and experience in the fieldsite is crucial for the construction of ethnographic knowledge, which is, in principle, dialogical and intersubjective (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

In the Digital Age, ‘geography can no longer be the defining framework for culture’ (Boyd 2009: 27), as people create cultures and communities on the Internet through digital media technologies. These online cultures and communities have opened up opportunities for researchers to apply traditional ethnographic principles (e.g. thick description, immersion, and self-reflexivity) to the study of Internet-based culture-sharing groups. As Murthy (2008: 838) notes, ‘as ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories’. Whether it is used for studying offline or online social phenomena, ethnography is about representing the social reality of others through the researcher’s analysis of his/her own experience in the world of these ‘others’.

In an effort to adapt the traditional ethnographic approach to the study of the complex world of the Internet and other technologically mediated communications, scholars have coined and applied different neologisms to describe their research methods: ‘technography’ (Richardson 1992), ‘online ethnography’ (Markham 1998), ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2000), and ‘digital ethnography’ (Murthy 2008), to name just a few. Kozinets (2010: 5) points out that, terminological issues aside, there is a lack of clarity and consistency in terms of the ‘specific procedural guidelines’ that a researcher can follow when conducting online ethnography. To fill this gap, Kozinets (ibid.) proposes a method, namely netnography, with a set of procedures—planning for fieldwork, entering the online fieldsite of a community, collecting and analyzing data, and ensuring strict adherence to ethical standards—designed to facilitate the study of communities and cultures on the Internet.

In keeping with traditional ethnographical principles, netnography is context-specific, immersive, descriptive, and multi-method (Kozinets 2010). Unlike traditional ethnography, however, netnography ‘uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon’ (ibid.: 60). Netnography therefore often involves the collection of three different types of data: (i) ‘archival data’, i.e. pre-existing computer-mediated communications and other digital artefacts created by research participants; (ii) ‘elicited data’, namely data co-created by the researcher and the participants through personal and communal interactions; and (iii) ‘fieldnote data’, that is notes written by the researcher regarding his/her own
observations and participation experiences of the research community (ibid.). Using the term ‘netnography’ in one’s research project signals ‘the importance of computer-mediated communications in the lives of cultural members’, and acknowledges that ‘netnography has its own uniquely adapted set of practices and procedures that set it apart from the conduct of face-to-face ethnography’ (ibid.: 60).

A key advantage of netnography is, therefore, that through its engagement with the Internet and related digital media technologies, it not only allows researchers to connect with participants from communities that do not exist, or would be difficult to access, in the offline world, but also enables the exploration of the ways in which participants deploy digital media technologies to construct and share meaningful experiences and identities online. Nevertheless, it is this convenient access to private aspects of participants’ lives that creates new ethical dilemmas about the implications of conducting covert/overt online research, the public/private nature of online interactions, and the need to anonymize/credit research participants, among other key issues.

Some scholars (e.g. Langer and Beckman 2005) maintain that a covert approach allows researchers to observe participant behaviour in an unobtrusive way, and thus can reduce the risk of distorting data gathered from the online fieldsites. By contrast, Kozinets argues, netnography ‘is a participative approach to the study of online culture and communities’ (2010: 74, emphasis in original). Removing the researcher’s participative role from netnography also removes the opportunity to experience ‘embedded cultural understanding’ (ibid.). Without the experience and knowledge of the cultural context, the researcher is forced to interpret unfamiliar cultural meanings from an outsider’s perspective; and since the researcher is not a participant in the online community under study, s/he has no one in that community to turn to in order to validate or dispute his/her interpretation. Consequently, the researcher is likely to provide a superficial analysis of the content that s/he manages to collect from the online fieldsite.

In order to adopt a participative role in the online community they would like to study, researchers should follow good netnographic research ethics. According to Kozinets (2010), such ethics dictate that the researcher should: (i) gain permission to study the community from its members; (ii) openly and accurately describe the research purpose for interacting with community members; and (iii) openly and accurately identify oneself, even though faking identities is common on the Internet. Kozinets (ibid.) also recommends that netnographers set up a dedicated webpage providing a more detailed explanation of their research focus and interests, and perhaps share the research findings with community members at different stages of the fieldwork.

When it comes to whether interactions on the Internet should be treated as if they took place in a public or a private space, Kozinets (2010: 141) argues that ‘only certain kinds of Internet experiences can be described in spatial terms’. These include interactions in chatrooms and emails, which are forms of communication taking place in guarded places with expectations of privacy, and thus should never be recorded without gaining explicit permission. Oftentimes, however, community members use the Internet as a type of publishing medium; in these cases, they are aware that their content is available publicly, and hence likely to be observed by strangers (ibid.). This does not necessarily mean that posting on blogs, online forums and other social networking sites should automatically be regarded as a public activity, since community members may not expect or even react with anger if their remarks were to be read by people outside their communities. Drawing on Walther (2002), Kozinets (2010: 142) argues that anyone using publicly accessible communication systems on the Internet should be aware that these systems are ‘mechanisms for the storage,
transmission, and retrieval of comments’. He concludes that archives/communications that are gathered from publicly accessible online venues are usable by researchers, as long as they have properly considered the potential embarrassments or risks that might come from exposing participants’ identities in the write-up, and the rights of participants to receive credit for their accounts and intellectual work (ibid).

This leads to another ethical dilemma about whether to credit or anonymize participants’ accounts and other creative work (e.g. photos, music and videos). On the one hand, much of their work can be considered to have ‘semi-published’ (Kozinets 2010) qualities and the content creators may be public figures. Researchers should therefore give the creators credit for their work, and ask them if they would like to have their real names, pseudonyms or both mentioned in the final research write-up. On the other hand, if the study is about a stigmatized, marginalized or illegal group, revealing participants’ real names or pseudonyms is not appropriate, since ‘pseudonyms are often traceable to real names, and people often care about the reputation of their pseudonyms’ (ibid.: 153). Consequently, when studying vulnerable groups, researchers should explain at the beginning of their research projects the risks that their projects may entail for participants, and note that the latter have been anonymized. This decision, as emphasized by Kozinets (ibid.), must be made by researchers and their institutions, rather than by the participants themselves.

A related issue to the crediting of the study subjects is whether or not it is necessary to interact with them in the offline world in order to verify the authenticity of their identities and the information contained in their personal profiles. Kozinets (2010) believes that the virtual worlds are legitimate sites of culture, and therefore it is not always necessary to combine netnography with real-life research or verification. If a study is focused on phenomena that are directly related to online communities and online culture itself, or to one or more of their particular manifestations or aspects (e.g. online identity, online cultural artefacts, relationships, and other social interactive elements emerging through computer-mediated communications), then netnography can be used as a stand-alone method. In other words, ‘pure’ netnography can be conducted by using data gathered exclusively from online or other technology-mediated communications (ibid.). Rather than their offline demographics, in pure netnographic studies the primary concern for researchers is the personal information and the profiles that community members choose to make available online, as these are the only indication that members have of each other’s identities and circumstances. If a study looks at members of a community whose activities extend well beyond their online interactions (e.g. Star Trek fans), then a ‘blended ethnography/netnography’ (ibid.: 65) would be more useful. Such blended studies, that combine online information with data gathered via traditional ethnographic techniques (e.g. in-person participant observation and face-to-face interviews) would be more helpful in yielding a general understanding of the experiences of the cultural members under scrutiny. A collection of their offline demographic data (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, class, and so forth) would therefore be necessary in order to reveal how their specific circumstances affect the ways they behave in both offline and online contexts.

As Kozinets (2010) notes, whether a netnography based solely on online data is sufficient depends entirely on the research focus and questions that the researcher seeks to investigate. Furthermore, he questions the distinction between online and offline social worlds, arguing that ‘the two have blended into one world: the world of real life, as people live it. It is a world that includes the use of technology to communicate, to commune, to socialise, to express, and to understand’ (ibid.: 2). This means that when we come to topics such as the world of fansubbing communities, activist subtitlers and amateur mediators, our cultural portrayals would be extremely limited without detailed reference to various forms of
technology-mediated communication that increasingly make these collectivities possible. Drawing on my own netnographic fieldwork on Chinese fansubbers’ deployment of digital media technologies to facilitate their daily subtitling activities, the next section illustrates how fieldwork is conducted in this environment, draws attention to the challenges encountered during the fieldwork and discusses the strategies used to manage them.

A netnography of a fansubbing group

My netnographic fieldwork focused on a group of Chinese fansubbers based on the blog publishing platform WordPress. The group, anonymized here for reasons of confidentiality, has been engaging in fansubbing activities over 10 years, working voluntarily around the clock to translate and circulate a variety of foreign audiovisual content, which had been either banned or extensively re-edited by Chinese censors, as part of the government’s fight against ‘vulgar’ content that usually features politically and sexually explicit material. Dodging Chinese censors and media regulators, the fansubbing group has developed into a well-established organization with over 1,000 members geographically dispersed across China and abroad. In order to uncover the subtle and precise ways in which group members make use of technology to facilitate their collaborative consumption of foreign audiovisual content and create shared meanings based on their membership of a fansubbing group, a netnography was conducted between March and December 2013.

Locating and entering the fieldsite

Since my study focused primarily on a community that was forged and interacted only online, a ‘pure’ netnography was chosen to investigate the textually mediated virtual world of community members. In order to gain direct experience of community membership, I decided to adopt a participative stance, and hence become grounded or embedded as much as possible in the online fieldsite.

The next step, then, was to gain permission to study the fansubbing group from its participants. After becoming acquainted with the history, genre speciality and membership requirements of the group via its blogging site on WordPress, I sent an exploratory email to the group’s public email address, introducing myself and the research project I was planning to undertake. My introductory email was informed by the following strategies:

- **being genuine**—I fully disclosed my motivation to join the group and expressed my wish to be one more of the community members, taking care to avoid using too many academic expressions in the message;
- **being humble**—drawing on the premise that members of the fansubbing group must know much more about their own culture, I concluded that humility was a must-have attitude on my part, as that would encourage more sincere input from group members;
- **working towards the values cherished by the group**—based on the group’s slogan (i.e. ‘share the fun of creation and appreciate the beauty of subtitles’), I decided to contribute my own knowledge and skills to the betterment of the group, and made sure that this intention was clearly signalled in my first email to the group;
- **abiding by the group’s codes of conduct**—I declared in the email that I was willing to follow the rules and norms of the group.
These strategies proved to be effective, as its gatekeepers granted me permission to join the group. The first thing they asked me to do was to introduce myself to the rest of the community in a chatroom called ‘newbies camp’ set up through Tencent QQ (i.e. China’s most popular instant messenger that integrates file transfer, QQ mail, QQ blog, and other Tencent services such as games and music). When entering the chatroom, I introduced myself by describing my research project and revealing my real name, in order to let group members know my identity as a researcher-participant. The following are some of the replies I received at that point:

Reply 1: [Is Dang Li] your real name?!

Reply 2: A-drop-of-sweat-on-a-face emoticon [to acknowledge the embarrassment that revealing my real name would have caused].

Reply 3: So, there are indeed some cute newbies who introduce themselves by telling us their real names. Smiley face emoticon.

Reply 4: Let us know your pseudonym, please!

At that point, I realized that it was the group’s norm to use pseudonyms to address each other; the norm was so strongly adhered to that, even when they met someone like me, members would rather not ask for/know my real name. Another thing that struck me as interesting was that no one in the chatroom seemed to be interested in my research project. Instead, they could not wait to find out what I looked like and urged me to upload a picture of myself. The first picture I uploaded was not approved, on the grounds that I was wearing a pair of sunglasses which blocked half of my face.

As an approved group member, I was warmly addressed through my pseudonym, or terms such as ‘dear sis’, and ‘MM’ (an Internet slang term pronounced as ‘mei mei’ in Chinese, which usually refers to ‘little sister’). In order to know more about me, some members asked which foreign language(s) I spoke or which audiovisual genres were my favourite; some looked for overlaps between the personal information featured in our QQ profiles, such as birthday, zodiac sign, horoscope, blood type, and geographical location. And there were others who seemed to be more interested in filling me in on who was who (e.g. group leaders and senior members) in the chatroom and their personalities. Such conversations were visible to everyone in the chatroom, making it easy for anyone interested in the topics being discussed to initiate further conversations. In this way, both newcomers, such as me, and existing members were able to quickly bond and form close relationships.

It soon became clear that the group’s activities were not confined to its blogging site; the community operated across digital platforms as diverse as QQ instant messenger, Sina Weibo (the most popular microblog service in China), Douban (a Chinese social networking site popular among media fans who form or join fan groups to review their favourite media products), and a password-protected forum set up through File Transfer Protocol (FTP) servers that hosted the group’s collection of foreign media content. This posed a challenge in terms of defining the boundaries of the fieldsite for my project. I turned to advice from previous scholars (e.g. Olwig and Hastrup 1997: 8), who pointed out that, when conducting netnography on a community whose members interact over multiple platforms, the researcher might still start from a particular digital site, but should ‘follow connections which were made meaningful from that setting’. Other scholars also argued that, instead of conceptualizing the online fieldsite as a ‘site’, it might be more useful to view it as a network that ‘incorporates physical,
virtual, and imagined spaces’ (Burrell 2009: 1) or as a set of relations that the netnographer traces between people, artefacts, and (physical and/or virtual) places (Hine 2009).

Consequently, I decided to allow my fieldwork to be fluid and based on the networks in which my participants embedded themselves. To do this, I did not identify any particular ‘sites’ as pre-existing places for my fieldwork; instead, I anchored it in my participants’ connections. By doing this, I was able to keep track of their activities, while engaging in constant interaction with them across all possible platforms. This comprehensive participation was crucial for me to gain a more nuanced understanding of the group’s social processes, since participants attuned their behaviour and interactions according to the communication functions provided by these platforms.

For instance, the open source blogging site WordPress and other social networking platforms (e.g. Sina Weibo and Douban) were mainly used by the group to publish its translated subtitles (saved as .srt files) for the public to download, promote its ethos, and attract potential participants. On the other hand, the group’s online forum was used to make group-wide announcements, publish guidelines on members’ codes of conduct, and provide members with instructions on the use of subtitling software applications and the subtitling conventions specified by the group (e.g. formatting standards, punctuation conventions, and the subtitling of off-screen voices). Supported by FTP technology, the forum also provided members with a safe and organized file-sharing environment, where they must provide their unique IDs and passwords to log into specified file-sharing spaces to upload or download the raw material (i.e. the video files of the original foreign films or TV programmes) for their subtitling projects. By separating what was given away (i.e. the translated subtitles) from what was retained (i.e. the original video content), the group managed to shield itself from potential government sanctions on large-scale unauthorized video distribution. Viewers outside the group who wanted to get their hands on the video content could still do so through other P2P networks (e.g. The Pirate Bay). However, compared to the video files hosted on such networks, the video files stored on the group’s forum were much smaller: they were compressed by the group’s ‘compression team’ to facilitate video-sharing within the group.

Taking advantage of QQ’s communication functions (e.g. real-time text messaging, audio/video chat, and file transfer), members of the fansubbing group created various chatrooms for sub-teams in charge of different tasks (e.g. raw material, compression, timing, translation, and proofreading) involved in the subtitling process. Members belonging to different sub-teams who were involved in subtitling the same video content often set up a temporary chatroom to discuss problems they encountered during the subtitling project. As a result, the scope of members’ activities expanded from one chatroom to several chatrooms, from interacting with only a few individuals in the same chatroom to doing so with a wider group of members from different chatrooms. In this sense, the instant messaging application QQ was used by members as a shared workspace, where multiple individuals were able to access, create and interact around a shared digital artefact; and where all group members were able to be present in multiple chatrooms at the same time and engage in multiple discussions and collaborations simultaneously.

While the ‘opening point’ of my fieldwork was the blogging site of the fansubbing group, the fieldsite kept evolving and expanding as my fieldwork progressed. This indicates that, rather than a particular website or platform, what holds an online assembly of individuals together as a community is its membership and members’ shared practices on different digital platforms. Consequently, following and participating in these practices help researchers delineate the boundaries of their online fieldsite. In other words, it is the researcher’s engagement with the research community that creates and defines a netnographic fieldsite.
Building research relationships

During the initial state of my fieldwork, I gained approval to study the fansubbing group from its gatekeepers as well as full access to the group’s members-only forum and QQ chatrooms. This, however, did not guarantee a sustained, community-wide acceptance of my presence. As noted by Hine (2005: 20), ‘establishing one’s presence as a bona fide researcher and trustworthy recipient of confidences is not automatic, and varies depending on the cultural context under investigation’. If the researcher failed to form trusting relationships with research participants, they could remain suspicious or even hostile towards the researcher, who could be treated as an inconvenience, or worse, an intruder to their normal activities. Further exacerbating the doubts of my participants about their role in and potential contribution to my research project was the fact that they were operating at the mercy of Chinese censors, who could invoke censorship or copyright laws to suppress their subtitling activities. Participants could suspect me of having an ulterior motive to collect their personal information that could put them at the risk of copyright and censorship sanctions. Moreover, since I was not physically co-present with my participants while conducting fieldwork, I could remain invisible to them without getting myself involved in their daily online interactions.

In order to make myself visible and credible to my participants, I sought to follow some of the guiding principles common to ethnographic studies, including the need for the researcher to ‘establish a large degree of ordinary sociability and normal social intercourse’ with research participants (Walsh 1998: 253); and ‘a commitment to try and view the object of enquiry through attempting some kind of alignment with the perspective of those who participate in the research’ (Horst and Miller 2006: 167). To put these principles into practice, I followed the most common practice for self-presentation and communication in the fansubbing group, i.e. pseudonymity—as explained above, group members, by default, used pseudonyms to address and interact with each other across their forum, chatrooms, and other social networks. I also followed another norm, i.e. using an array of endearment terms (e.g. ‘brother’, ‘sister’, and ‘sweetie’) traditionally reserved for close family members or friends, rather than online contacts, when interacting with participants, as this appeared to be a widely held practice in the group. While most participants used avatars (e.g. cute animals or cartoon characters) as their profile pictures, I always posted a face picture in all my profiles on the platforms I used to interact with my study subjects.

I also found it useful to highlight my academic background and experience in (audio-visual) translation in my personal profiles, since doing so conveyed to my participants that I shared similar interests and experiences in subtitling. In fact, most of my participants were not interested in my academic identity as a researcher in translation studies. Instead, they were most interested in my future potential role as a valuable contributor who may assist them with their subtitling projects and other organizational activities. A typical day spent with my participants involved me engaging in tasks such as timing, translating or proof-reading subtitles, using the group’s subtitling software application on my computer, and having multiple conversations with group members who were engaged in the same subtitling project(s) that I was working on.

Our conversations usually unfolded in QQ chatrooms created to facilitate the coordination of specific projects. We often started out informing each other about the progress of our own tasks, and then discussed the problems we had encountered and came up with ideas to solve them. Quite often, we also discussed our viewing experiences of the content being subtitled, which opened up further conversations on various topics, ranging from mundane
topics such as weather, pets and hobbies, to more intimate or sensitive ones, pertaining to love relationships, sexuality, pornography, and domestic politics. During such discussions, I never forced or cajoled my participants to reveal sensitive information about themselves. Neither was I judgemental about the views they shared on sensitive topics. I always ‘listened’ intently before typing my own views, and shared as much about myself as they shared about themselves in order to be as relatable to them as possible.

By following the normative practices regarding self-presentation and interaction in the fansubbing group, blending in through genuine and respectful communications, and being as relatable as possible, my presence in the group was normalized. In doing so, I also developed closer relationships with my participants. Nevertheless, despite the efforts I made towards building rapport with group members, it was they themselves who ultimately formed their impressions of me—not just about me as a researcher, or a participant, or a netnographer—but as a person. Knowing that digital media technologies provided research participants with an opportunity to access and learn more about various aspects of my digital self that I presented on my social media sites (e.g. my QQ blog and Sina Weibo account), I considered whether I should tighten my privacy settings on these sites to limit participants’ access to parts of my profiles that were only visible to my family and close friends. In the end, I chose to open up my digital identity. My online profiles and the content posted in them (e.g. photos, and comments) that were available to my friends and family became also accessible to my participants, in order to convey the degree of openness that I expected from them.

During my fieldwork, members of the fansubbing group frequently visited my social media sites, leaving comments on my newly added pictures or blog posts. I also ‘liked’ or commented on their latest updates. Such interactions granted us more opportunities for social exchange and mutual investigation. Through this interaction, I amassed a significant number of QQ friends and Sina Weibo followers from the fansubbing group. These connections became useful, not only as a way to form a genuine bond with group members in the context of virtual settings, but also as a way to secure their sincere responses in an online questionnaire that I conducted about their sense of shared identity, as well as a high participation rate—40 out of 56 potential participants submitted a completely finished questionnaire.

Of particular significance in conducting this online questionnaire was to explore, from the point of view of participants, the meanings they attached to their experiences as members of the fansubbing group. The nature of that experience can be illustrated by the following extracts from some participants’ responses to one of the questions in the questionnaire (both the question and answers were originally in Chinese and have been translated here by the author):

**Question:** How would you describe your relationship(s), if any, with other members (i.e. do you know them through certain social media platforms or in other contexts, e.g. offline, work, school, or other organizations)?

**Participant 1 Response:** People tend to distinguish themselves from the crowd based on how they label each other. Instead of labelling ourselves as ‘a fansubbing group’, I want to use ‘sharing, fun, caring and supporting’ to label our group. It is not just a virtual group, but a group formed by real people. Although I only know the pseudonyms of my fellow members, their selfless dedication to the group’s fansubbing activities is the source of my sense of belonging. They are the reason why I am still in the group.

**Participant 2 Response:** Under this sky [the fansubbing group], there are numerous battles [subtitling projects] being fought [carried out by group members] every day. During
such processes, our friendships are strengthening day by day. I like to call my fellow members comrades-in-arms. ‘Selfless dedication’, ‘free sharing’, and ‘unconditional love’—these are things that are hard to find in our society. Several years ago, I joined the group to pursue my dreams. Fortunately, I met a group of people sharing the same dreams and beliefs. More fortunately, these dreams still remain the same until now, although a lot of people keep joining and leaving the group. For me, all fellow members are my dear friends and comrades from the moment they join the group.

Participant 3 Response: In the [Chinese] film *My Brothers and Sisters*, the father tells his children: ‘We are snowflakes falling from the sky. As soon as we fall to the ground, we melt into water and freeze together, we will never be separated’. All my brothers and sisters in the fansubbing group are just like snowflakes falling from the sky, and the group is the place where we melt together.

These extracts show how a semi-structured questionnaire equipped me with an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives and accounts of their technology-mediated socialization experiences that are often not amenable to observations. The intimate connection experienced by participants regardless of their spatial and temporal distances resonated with Anderson’s (2006) ‘imagined communities’, a term designating virtual groupings whose members do not have to meet face-to-face in order to feel connected to each other. In the case of the fansubbing group, metaphors such as ‘battlefield’, ‘sky’, or ‘snowflakes melting together’ were used by group members to describe their mental images of mutual affinity. All these expressions illustrated how computer-mediated communications can ‘[dissolve] distances by reembedding social relationships that are disembedded in space-time’ (Fuchs 2005: 15). By combining my own participation experience with members’ accounts, I was able to produce a detailed description of the lived experience of a group of Chinese media audiences engaging in collaborative and community-based translation of foreign media products.

Fieldwork tools

Although the Internet and other related communication technologies allowed me to connect with the fansubbing group at all times from any location, I was faced with problems to decide which tools I should use to capture and manage various forms of digital data across multiple sites, and how to add reflective notes and insights while capturing digital data—so that the data, e.g. a particular message or image, could be adequately contextualized and interpreted. As far as these issues are concerned, Kozinets (2010) recommends a range of dedicated computer programs facilitating the qualitative research, such as NVivo, which allows researchers to capture, store and analyse digital data, while adding reflective fieldnotes along the way.

After spending a considerable amount of time becoming familiar with NVivo, I decided not to use this complex software application, as it could actually get in the way of my data collection and analytical processes. During my fieldwork, I used different tools to document my observations on participants’ behaviour. I relied heavily on the note-taking software application Evernote to organize my archival and fieldnote data. Evernote, along with other social media applications (e.g. WordPress, QQ and Sina Weibo) used by my participants, were installed on the devices that I used to conduct my fieldwork. Evernote Web Clipper was further added as an extension tool for the desktop browser (Chrome) that I used to visit
the group’s blogging site, online platform, and other social networking sites (Sina Weibo and Douban) popular among group members. This application allowed me to capture any digital artefact (e.g. text, posting, image, or other multimedia files) that I found interesting on a webpage that I was browsing. The captured web clips were saved as they appeared on the original pages and as notes in my Evernote account, together with the URLs of the pages those clips were taken from. This means that I could always go back to the original pages to gain a sense of the situational contexts of captured data.

With Evernote, I was able to add my own comments in each clipped note. The comments usually referred to the nature of the clipped material, the meaning of the material to participants, my interpretation of the material, and an analysis of the material. All the fieldnotes created and saved in my Evernote account were indexed with titles and tags, which thus became searchable and filterable. This provided me with keyword-based search results that could inspire or remind me of any other related notes stored in Evernote. Besides, the sync feature of Evernote meant that notes stored in my Evernote account could automatically be synchronized between my laptop and smartphone when they were connected to the Internet. Even when I did not have my laptop with me, I could still visit my fieldsite, and add or edit notes through the Evernote app installed on my phone. Combining a traditional computer with a smartphone allowed me to immerse myself fully in the daily life of the fansubbing group.

Apart from asynchronous communications on multiple social networking sites, participants also stayed connected using the QQ real-time messaging service, which was the primary social space for them to engage not only in group discussions about issues and problems encountered while carrying out their subtitling projects, but also in spontaneous conversations about a variety of non-translation related topics—as elaborated above. Simply by logging into my QQ account via my computer or smartphone, I could check, search, and export the group’s chat records through the Message History function provided by QQ. Compared to asynchronous messages posted on the group’s forum and other public online sites, conversations unfolding in the group’s QQ chatrooms were more private and intimate, and could easily border on being politically sensitive or socially transgressive. Insofar as collecting communications from chatrooms could breach ethical standards, recordings were immediately transferred to an encrypted hard drive and deleted from my devices (laptop and phone). Care was also taken to ensure that the identifying details (e.g. QQ accounts, pseudonyms and real names) of participants were removed when their QQ messages were directly quoted in my final report.

The tool used to conduct the online questionnaire was the web-based survey software application SelectSurvey.Net. The security level was set as ‘force anonymous’ in configuring the questionnaire to avoid potential breaches of participants’ privacy. This means that all my respondents’ personal details (e.g. email address) were removed from and became untraceable in their responses. To further minimize digital traces of our interactions, responses were exported as an Excel file (as allowed by the software) to an encrypted hard drive, and deleted from my SelectSurvey.Net account and my computer.

Summary

Under the impact of media convergence, audiences are increasingly migrating online to seek out and promote their own media experiences by engaging in various forms of media co-creative practices, such as participatory AVT. This makes it more important than ever
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to examine how audiences utilize media content for their own agendas, and how this in turn feeds back to the AVT industry and informs commercial AVT practices. Although the phenomenon of participatory AVT has not passed unnoticed by AVT scholars, methodological innovation has not kept pace, resulting in studies that often focus on the textual features of amateur outputs or the collaborative workflow models of amateur AVT. Little attention, however, has been paid to amateur mediators themselves, their perspectives, motivations and experiences of their involvement in participatory AVT. This is largely due to the fluid and often transient processes in which audiences deploy and interact with digital media, which make them difficult to study, but also make them compelling objects of ethnographic inquiry.

In this chapter, netnography has been presented as a useful method for studying the phenomenon of participatory AVT. As a specialized form of ethnography in the social spaces of online environments, netnography involves an active approach that seeks to engage and connect with members of a community that manifests itself through computer-mediated communications, with the aim to obtain a detailed and embedded understanding of the cultural meanings of that community. Utilizing this method, it is possible for us to identify, select, analyze and aggregate the particularities in networked forms of AVT performed by consumers, in order to gain first-hand and authentic insights into their collaborative consumption experiences. Such insights can be used as the basis for developing effective AVT services tailored to the real needs and expectations of media consumers.

Through a reflexive account of the author’s netnographic fieldwork, this chapter has examined strategies developed by the author to overcome methodological challenges encountered during her fieldwork, which mainly include defining the boundaries of a multisited community; building relationships with participants in virtual contexts; and using fieldwork tools to manage digital data. While the strategies developed by the author are in relation to her personal experience in an online community formed by Chinese fansubbers, these strategies could provide some useful clues for researchers who may find themselves in similar situations.

More importantly, this chapter has attempted to show that a netnographic fieldwork is a continuous, self-reflexive experience constantly negotiated between the researcher, research participants, and the research context. As illustrated by the author’s fieldwork, multiple online sites and identities have been navigated during the research process, sometimes as an outsider of the research community; sometimes as a peripheral participant on the way to full participation; and sometimes as an insider participating in the practices of the community. This indicates that (i) the fieldsite for the study of an online community can no longer be conceptualized as a single site or platform that the researcher enters and inhabits, but rather as the outcome of the researcher’s trajectories in following and engaging with participants’ practices across different online venues; and (ii) the notion of ‘insider vs. outsider’ is not fluid enough to truly reflect the experience of conducting online fieldwork as researchers reposition themselves within and across various platforms at various times throughout the research process. Hence, how researchers present and manage their digital identity can significantly influence their ability to gain access to the research community, forge trusting research relationships, collect good quality data, and construct netnographic knowledge. The author would therefore encourage other scholars to ‘acknowledge and critically (though not necessarily negatively) engage with the range of possibilities of position, place and identity’ (Coffey 1999: 36), so that we can continually be aware of our netnographic self and understand its relevance in the situations that we are studying.
Further reading

Hine, C. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*, London: SAGE | *This book shows how ethnographic methods can be adapted creatively to research into computer-mediated forms of communication. Internet is conceptualized here as both a site for cultural formations and a cultural artefact which is shaped by users’ understandings and expectations.*


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